

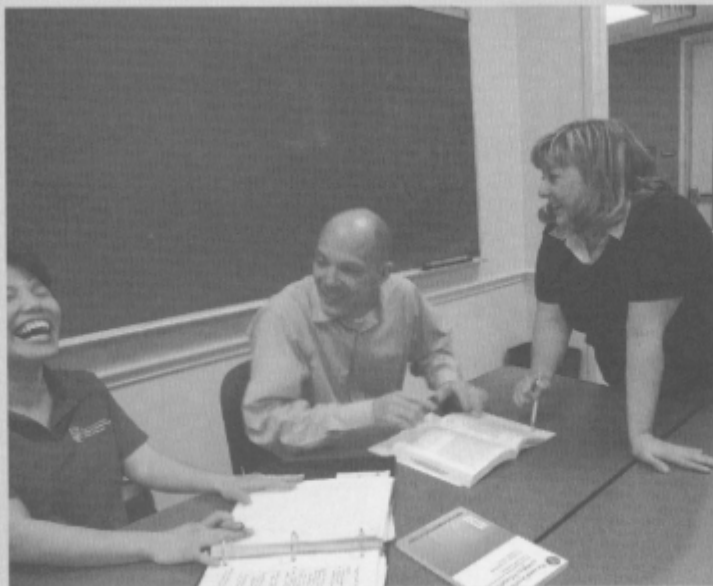
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This case history makes it clear that you do not have to be a professional game designer to design a class as a game. Here all the teacher needed was to be surrounded by gamers, which is not hard these days. Highlights for me in this article included allowing students to award achievements to other students, and the use of students' avatars as a visual representation of their progress. In video games, we call this "equipping" our avatars.

## EQUIP

In video games, players provide their avatars with the best armor and weapons they can find. Not only do the stats associated with the gear make them more powerful, but it is also visible to other players, making it a great way to show off a player's achievements either due to the high cost or scarcity of the gear.

Let's see how Professor Jacob equipped her players' avatars (see Figure CH6.1).



**Figure CH6.1**

Stacy A. Jacob (right) with students May Lim and Ken Gassoit.

I am an Assistant Professor of Higher Education at Texas Tech University, and I teach masters and doctoral students, who are college administrators preparing for advancement, want to become faculty, or plan to work in government doing research at colleges and universities. I generally do not play video games, and I am not engaged in *Mafia Wars* or *Farmville* on Facebook; however, my husband, Jason, is an IT guy and a gamer. Over the years, he has introduced me to all kinds of games (mostly card-based like *Magic: The Gathering* and role-playing influenced board games such as *Settlers of Catan*). In many ways, I am one of the least likely persons to be incorporating ideas from a professor that is working in games and simulation arts. I like actual letters rather than emails, old books, and things from the past. Jason is fascinated with technology and loves video games. It is unlikely that I would have ever heard of Lee Sheldon without my husband's help.

About a year ago, I got an email from Jason that said, "Watch this clip, it talks about a professor who is using games in his classroom, and it sounds like a cool idea." Attached was a YouTube video of a lecture. The speaker in the lecture

discussed Lee Sheldon's ideas about using gaming techniques in the college classroom. I both teach a class on "College Teaching" and am always experimenting with my own teaching. I was intrigued, so I wrote to Mr. Sheldon to ask him about his class. He sent me his syllabus, I read it, and then began thinking about my own teaching and classes.

I began talking about Mr. Sheldon's ideas in my "College Teaching" class. My students were also intrigued with his ideas, and so I started to experiment in an online class about the history of higher education that I was teaching the following semester. I created various levels that my students could achieve over the semester and a menu of assignments students could choose from, rather than a set of assignments they must complete. I also gave students choices in how they could earn participation points. The result was positive, and so that summer I decided in the fall that I would redesign my face-to-face class on the history of higher education. To do so, I turned to Jason, Jason's gaming friends, and my brother-in-law, who is also a gamer. Their collective advice, Lee Sheldon's ideas about using leveling, and lots of creativity helped me create the "History of Higher Education in the United States," a class that I will detail below.

To begin, I thought about the idea of the class being a big game with a series of little games within the big one. The big game of the class is divided into four distinct sections. I labeled the sections on my syllabus as the "Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior" years. Each year has a new set of rules as to how to earn "achievements" points and several classes within it. Each class represents a little game, which I labeled as a *quest*. Each quest has its own name based on the topic of the class. Because this is a graduate student course, each class meets once a week for three hours.

The freshman year units concentrated on introductory material to the class and contained four classes: an introduction to the course and the syllabus, two classes that overviewed the history of higher education, and a class that introduced doing archival research. After the freshman year, we looked at higher education history era by era and as we moved through the various years, like the college experience, both the history and the class became cognitively more complex. The sophomore year we covered higher education history in the Colonial era, the Antebellum era, the lead into and the Progressive era, and a

class on women's education. The junior year contained units on higher education during and between World Wars I & II, and post-World War II, and student protest. The senior year covered various people who have been left out of higher education histories and modern history.

In each class, students can earn "achievement points" by doing things such as attending class, making a good point, making a great point, being helpful to others, etc. In addition to the various achievement points that I give away (in the form of various colored poker chips representing different point values), each year students also each get one achievement that they can award to any other student for things like advancing my understanding, being helpful in group work, and so forth. At the end class, I act as a banker and students can trade up chips of a certain value for better chips (gold, silver, bronze). When you trade up chips, you not only earn a more prestigious color of chip, but the new chip you pay for is worth slightly more than what you paid for it. For example, you pay 11 points for a bronze chip, but the bronze chip is worth 12 points. You have to be in class to earn chips, and you have to read and talk in class to get a chip. Even though I teach only graduate courses where most students attend and read, using the achievement points has been a great motivator to my students. This semester I have had fewer late students (mine come directly from work on campus), less absences, and much better class discussion (which leads me to believe that they are not only reading the material, but also thinking and planning for class discussion).

Students are assigned to two groups, a gaming group and an expert group. Experts pay particular attention to certain lenses in the readings each week and have the charge to do outside work to make sure they understand higher education through their lens. Some of the expert groups are popular culture, women and minorities, and government policies. Each gaming group contains different experts. Each week for the little games or quests, I can split groups out into either their gaming group or their expert groups. The expert group is a concept from the teaching literature that is generally called *jigsawing*. Group assignments for the course can also be assigned to gaming groups or expert groups.

The quests each week are games or activities that relate to the course content for the week. After a discussion of the week's readings, we do a quest to solidify the

information we learned. These quests vary from a board game I made about women's history to making protest posters and chants related to class material. Some quests were created by me, and some were created by students as one of the menu of assignments from which they could choose. Students have commented to me over and over that the quests both help them remember the material and are fun.

Each student also has an avatar. It is a cut-out paper body that they drew on to represent themselves. This was our "get-to-know-you" activity on the first day of class—students introduced their avatar after drawing on them. At the end of each quest, I hand out something for them to "stick" on their avatar that represents the era we worked on (buckled shoes for the Colonial era, magnifying glasses for archival history, etc.). These are paper items I copy and cut out, and they stick on with double-sided tape. When students lead the quest, they provide the items for the avatar. At the end of the class, they get to keep the avatars as a visual representation of everything they learned.

In addition to all of this, I kept the idea of a menu of assignments from which students could choose. By using both the "achievement points" and the assignments, students can level up to a better grade. The students like it, and I like the fact that it makes every student feel that they are capable of getting to the top level, which will ultimately be reflected as a course grade of an A. If they bomb something, they can always do more, and doing more equals learning more. By using menus and leveling up, my students stayed motivated, and learning ceased to be about grades and returned to what it should be about, engaging and advancing what you know.

After my first run at the redesigned class, there were things that I needed to change, based on student comments and my experiences. I needed a better tracking system for all the points my students earned, for example. The tracking system could easily be done online through Blackboard. I also needed to refine my "achievement points" system and make it a bit simpler. Upon reflection, my menu of assignments should have been expanded to include more variety in length and type.

Designing my class with gaming in mind has been one of the most positive things I have ever done. It is lots of work and every week, I carry Ziplock bags for each student that contain their poker chips, avatars, and weird plastic objects



I give out as special awards. It is a pain, but watching my students engage in quests enthusiastically, seeing them motivated, and well prepared for class, and hearing them say that they are having fun and love history makes it worth lugging bags of things around. Let me reiterate, I am a novice gamer at best, and I am far from the most technically savvy person out there. However, with creativity, any professor can adapt a class into an exciting experience for their students based on gaming ideas. The result is a profound learning experience for both you and your students.